

Game Over: Chinese Company Deploys Facial Recognition to Limit Youths' Play

Tencent Games says it has been using facial recognition to enforce China's rules on how much time people under 18 can spend playing video games.



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For almost every video game restriction, children and teenagers will find a way around it.

But the room to maneuver is shrinking in China, where underage players are required to log on using their real names and identification numbers as part of countrywide regulations aimed at limiting screen time and keeping internet addiction in check. In 2019, the country imposed a cybercurfew barring those under 18 from playing games between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m.

Recognizing that wily teenagers might try to use their parents' devices or identities to circumvent the restrictions, the Chinese internet conglomerate Tencent said this week that it would close the loophole by deploying facial recognition technology in its video games.

"Children, put your phones away and go to sleep," Tencent said in a statement on Tuesday when it officially introduced the features, called Midnight Patrol. The wider rollout set off a debate on Chinese internet platforms about the benefits and privacy risks of the technology.

Some were in favor of the controls, saying they would combat adolescent internet addiction, but they also questioned how the data would be relayed to the authorities. Others said Tencent was assuming an overly paternalistic role.

"This type of thing ought to be done by the parents," a user named Qian Mo Chanter wrote on Zhihu, a Quora-like platform. "Control the kid and save the game."

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Thousands of internet users complained about the tightening controls and the shrinking space for anonymity in cyberspace. A hashtag on Weibo, a microblogging platform, reminded gamers to make sure they were fully dressed in case the camera captured more than their faces.

Xu Minghao, a 24-year-old programmer in the northern city of Qingdao, said he would delete any video games that required facial recognition, citing privacy concerns. "I don't trust any of this software," he wrote on Zhihu.

Privacy concerns were widely discussed when the real-name registration requirement for minors was introduced in 2019. Describing facial recognition technology as a double-edged sword, the China Security and Protection Industry Association, a government-linked trade group, said in a paper published last year that the mass collection of personal data could result in security breaches.

Tencent said it began testing facial recognition technology in April to verify the ages of avid nighttime players and has since used it in 60 of its games. In June, it prompted an average of 5.8 million users a day to show their faces while logging in, blocking more than 90 percent of those who rejected or failed facial verification from access to their accounts.

Facial recognition technology is commonly used in China to facilitate daily activities as well as regulate public behavior. Hotels use it when checking in guests, while banks use it to verify payments. The state uses it to track down criminal suspects. One city has even deployed the technology to shame its residents out of the habit of wearing pajamas in public.

In the case of video games, the government has long blamed them for causing nearsightedness, sleep deprivation and low academic performance among young people. The 2019 regulations also limited how much time and money underage users could spend playing video games.

China is not the only country seeking to rein in screen time. Last year, Kagawa Prefecture in Japan asked parents to set time limits on children under 20 years old, though without specifying enforcement mechanisms. The move prompted a 17-year-old high school student to challenge the government in court. The suit is still continuing.

Hikari Hida contributed reporting.